

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Who shapes education reform policies in Lebanon? The role of research centres

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Abstract

Most Arab countries are currently undergoing significant education reform. However, there is a paucity of research on how reforms are crafted and educational policies constructed. Lebanon witnessed two education reforms since the Taif Agreement in 1989. This paper examines the role of research centres in influencing the last two education reforms. It selects a case study of an independent, non-governmental educational association and studies the role it played in these two reforms. Interviews with policy makers and members of the association were conducted. The study found that contrary to the conventional wisdom, policy makers did call on research institutes when designing their reform. However, this role of researchers was limited to an expert's role rather than an empirical one oriented toward the production of factual data in areas that need addressing. The haphazard relationships between policy makers and researcher centres was influenced by a number of factors, such as personal relationships, policy brokers, donors, and the availability of reputable research centres. The study also showed reluctance amongst academics that constitute the members of this association to play a direct role in influencing policy making.

Keywords: Education reform, Lebanon, Research centres, Policy making

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Introduction

Education Policy in the Arab world has undergone immense change in the last half century. While many Arab countries managed to achieve significant steps in increasing student

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enrolment and widening access to education, the poor quality of education offered in most Arab countries continued to raise major concerns resulting in calls for new reforms in education. As a result we see several Arab countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, and Lebanon, launched large education reforms in recent years. To date, Lebanon underwent two education reforms since 1990 (1994 and 2010 reforms). One of the fundamental questions posed by recurrent attempts of education reform in the Arab countries is: how are reforms implemented? Who is involved in designing and implementing them? Who funds them? What role do academics, researchers, teachers and the local community play in shaping these reforms?

This study examines the role of research centres in the two- 1994 and 2010 - education reforms in Lebanon. We interviewed founders and current members of private educational research association in Lebanon. Interviews focused on their perceptions of the associations' role in shaping educational policies in Lebanon, as well as their involvement in 1994 and 2010 reforms. We also interviewed ministers of education and research centre directors to collect more concrete evidence on policy makers' approach to research centres, as well as the role research centres played in the two reforms.

The paper is composed of three main sections. In section one, we review the literature on the relationship between research and policymaking. In section two, contextualises the research centre selected for the case study and outlines the rationale for this selection. The results are then presented in section three.

Education in Lebanon and Reform

Prior to the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in Lebanon, the public education system witnessed its golden age, especially in the expansion of education access to the most disadvantaged groups, which were almost completely deprived of education in the preceding years. However, the fierce civil war took a toll on the public educational system when it nearly collapsed by the end of the war in 1990.

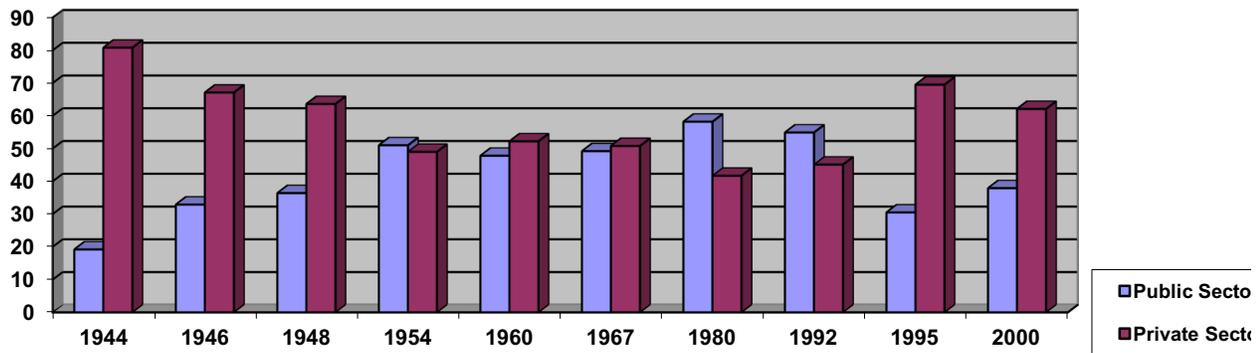


Figure 1: Distribution of primary and secondary schools in Lebanon in percent (Bashur, 1997)

Education was considered an important means for promoting social cohesion in post civil war Lebanon. Importantly, article 10 of the Taif (Government of Lebanon, 1989) agreement stipulated the need to develop a new curriculum that contributes to citizenship. As a result, the Centre for Education Research and Development (CERD), a public institution under the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education, initiated the Plan for Educational Reform in 1994. The result was the implementation of a new curriculum implemented in 1997. This reform restored part of the old glory of public schools and manifested in an increased the number of students in the public sector from over 30,000 in 1997/1998 to reach a peak of 36,000 Lebanese children in 1999 and 2000 to 36,000 (Centre for Research and Development, 1999).² However, the optimism soon faded. Poor quality of education resulted in high drop out rates and the number of students in the public sector started to dwindle. Currently the number of children in public schools is 27,000 (less than 29 per cent of all students in Lebanon). The vast majority of these students hail from the deprived areas of Akkar and Bekka, where parents cannot afford private school fees. As a result, parents send their children to public schools, despite the obstacles and overall low education attainment of public school students. The worsening conditions for public education in Lebanon resulted in the development of an education reform initiative begun in 2006 that culminated in the publication of a new education strategy for Lebanon in 2010. The reform strategy aspired to achieve a 50% increase in adult literacy rates, particularly for women, by 2015. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) secured 150 million dollars from a

² CRDP, available at: http://www.crdp.org/CRDP/Arabic/ar-statistics/a_statisticpublication.asp

variety of international agencies, including the World Bank, EU, USAID, UNDP and UNICEF, to fund this reform. The implementation of the strategy has already begun.

1994 Education reform

The Taif Accord, which brought an end to the civil war in 1989, initiated a major education sector reform. The document called for the development of a new curriculum to promote national unity. Section 3.F.5 of the Taif agreement states that

The curricula shall be reviewed and developed in a manner that strengthens national belonging, fusion, spiritual and cultural openness. (Government of Lebanon, 1989)

As a result the plan for reforming education and rebuilding the public education sector started. In 1994, the government outlined the “Educational Recovery Plan” for the reform of the educational system, a system previously unchanged since 1959. The main objectives of this new plan were to raise the standards of education, enhance the infrastructure needed for the provision of free education to all Lebanese children, and review the transition between academic and technical education in addition to the creation of a new curriculum. In 1995, the Council of Ministers approved the ‘New Framework of Education in Lebanon’ and a new curriculum and textbooks were introduced in 1997.

The 1994 Framework and the new curriculum were developed by the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD). The later created a committee to develop the new curriculum and textbooks which is comprised of educational experts, teachers from different sectarian groups as well as from the public and private sectors, university academics, government bodies, and religious advisors. The new curriculum had two main aims. First, the curriculum meant to build within the personality of the individual the ability to achieve one’s goals, to carry responsibility, to value morals, to treat others with a sense of responsible citizenship, and to participate in society. The second aim was to build a unified and cohesive Lebanese society, able to practice its cultural roles in the global community, in general, and more specific roles in the Arab community, in particular. New textbooks for all subjects except history and religion were developed and distributed to schools.

2010 Education Reform

Two decades passed since the implementation of 1994 reform. Despite the achievements of the 1994 reform, the public sector only attracted less than 20% of the total student population in the

primary stage. The gap between the public and private schools widened. Public schools became the only option for the most disadvantaged groups, who are unable to afford the low budget private schools. Primary education drop out rates soared. In 2004/5, drop out rates for elementary school students ranged between 0.5% and 3.4% at elementary level; 4.5% at intermediate level; and 27% in grade 9 (Brevet) (LAES, 2007). Net enrolment rates for Lebanese students dropped from 92.7% (primary) to 68.5% in intermediary, which could be related to low primary completion rates, high repetition and/or drop-outs at this level. The highest share of repeaters out of all grades in the educational cycle is found in the 7th grade – the first grade of the intermediate level, with 8.5% repeaters (CAS, UNICEF, 2009). Both gross and net enrolments for girls (at 104% and 72.5% respectively) were higher than for boys (92% and 65%), indicating a likelihood for grade repetition or to drop-out among boys. There were major disparities among regions concerning repetitions with the highest in Bekaa and North Lebanon. Students' academic performance and repetition rates were corresponded to levels of income and school type (public versus private) (Consultation and Research Institute, 2000).

The above analysis of access and quality of education in Lebanon after 25 years since the implementation of 1994 reform, shows major gaps in the capacity of the reform to improve the quality of education. As a result, the development of a new educational strategy began in 2005 and finally saw the light in 2010. It is worth highlighting that three other reform plans were developed but did not materialise between the 1994 education reform plan and the 2010 Education strategy.

Having provided an overall view of education in Lebanon and the two reforms to be examined, we shall provide a review of the main literature and debates on the relationship between research and policy making.

POLICY MAKERS AND RESEARCH

The Arab world witnessed several education reforms in the past thirty years. Despite these important initiatives in many parts of the Arab world, especially in relation to widening access to education, the quality of education in most Arab countries remains disappointing (The World Bank, 2008, the Arab Knowledge Report, 2009, and the Arab World's Education Report Card, 2012). There is a paucity of research which both reflects critically on the process of planning and designing education reforms and on the role of academic and research institutions in shaping education sector reforms (El-Amine, 2005, Karami, 2010). Most existing literature on education reform focuses on the objectives and effectiveness of the reforms (LAES, 2003,

Shuayb, 2005). Nonetheless, the few critical studies on education reform in the Arab countries attribute the limited success of reform policies to a top-down approach (Bashur 1984, 2005) or by political agenda-driven reforms without participation of experts and professionals (Karami, 2014). Others conclude by calling for a stronger link between knowledge producers and policy makers and a greater acknowledgment of knowledge produced locally, when conducting education reform (Karami, 2014, El-Amine, 2005).

Beyond the education sector and more broadly, Hanafi and Arvanitis (2015), highlight the fragmentation between policy making and knowledge production and *knowledge translation* in the Arab world. Moreover, they argue that a condescending attitude toward public and policy social research exist amongst some professional and critical social scientists. Their findings are supported by other studies, such as El-Jardali et al. (2012), who reported a lack of policy impact for many of the research centres. Hanafi and Arvanitis (2015) highlight the dominance of a positivist approach to research by many professional researchers, “who have set aside their ethical responsibilities by avoiding both expressing their views (pro or con) in public forums and lobbying public officials.” Some scholars (Harb, 1996; Balqiz 1999) tend to discourage academics from being involved in politics and consider that this cannot be accompanied by any critical discourse. The rupture Hanafi and Arvanitis claim is mutual between professional academics and policy makers, the latter of which rarely calls on the former when developing policies.

A number of reasons are cited for why policy makers do not use research centres and research. These reasons include: a difficulty to translate think tank ideas into policies, timing, and the lack of a common language (Worpole, 1998). Undoubtedly the link between research and policy making is not always clear or even existing. The fissure between the two is present on many levels. Whitehurst, who reviewed hundreds of sessions presented at the American Education Research Association (AERA), found many titles to be arcane and idiosyncratic, such as “Episodes of Theory Building as Transformative and Decolonising Process: A micro-ethnographic inquiry into a deeper Awareness of Embodied Knowing” (Cited in Bransford, 2009, p.5). Whitehurst identified a gap between the “supply” side and the “demand” side and for an academic oriented research culture which does not either provide knowledge that can be accessed by policy makers or is always relevant. On the other hand, policy makers do not always actively seek the knowledge provided by researchers.

Cohen (1985, cited in Bransford, 2009) found that policy makers rely mainly on information from the districts and governorates or information from individuals, but rarely from national or independent organisations. He also noted that readily accessible information received in a timely fashion and directly applicable to specific state or policy contexts at an inexpensive cost was most likely research state policy makers would use in the policy making process.

On the other hand, using evidence-based research by policy makers is not always a straightforward task. Hacsı (2002) notes

When it [research] seems relatively straightforward, it often lacks the specifics needed to describe exactly how programmes should be implemented.

Hacsı states that policy debates are often influenced more by politics and ideology than by presentation of evidence. Researchers produce knowledge, while policy makers' business is to use knowledge. Most research does not provide complete answers nor does it often answer specific questions and hence, the research offered is incomplete. For instance, we will never be able to know that a particular curriculum is the best-suited to students, nor will we know exactly how to train teachers most effectively. Hence, educators and policy makers often have to act on incomplete information.

Shwartz and Kardos (2009) describe a number of reasons why policy makers are influenced so little by the findings of education research. Time features prominently among these. Policy makers need a quick research turn around time and are unlikely to wait for the long process of academic publishing. Yet academics are discouraged from publishing their original findings in anything other than peer reviewed scholarly journals, which count the most in their academic career. Audience is another factor. Scholars often write for other researchers and sometimes for practitioners and rarely for policy makers. Journals, on the other hand, favour articles that are of complex design and presentation of findings and academic language such as theoretical framework, methodology, methods of analysis, and findings. Researchers rarely discuss the implications of their research on policy makers or suggest concrete recommendations, which is what policy makers would like to read. The length of these articles is another obstacle for policy makers.

Yet bridging the gap between the two worlds is not impossible. In her study of research that ended up influencing policy makers, Susan Fuhrman highlighted a number of conditions that helped achieve this which included the following: researched topics important for policy makers,

confirmed conventional wisdom, had pre-existing constituencies, were led by persuasive policy brokers, were longitudinal, were successfully replicated, and produced usable research synthesis. The importance of the policy brokers was similarly emphasised by other research. Here the source, communication channel, format of knowledge, and the message itself are all essential for shifting the thinking of policy makers. As a result, Shwartz and Kardos (2009) highlight the important role of universities in producing policy brokers.

Yet even when policy makers rely on evidence, the use remains inconsistent. Some policy makers often envision evidence as an instrumental step in policy making. They imagine their civil servants will use evidence directly and centrally to provide guidance or decisions to policy and practice. However, Shwartz and Kardos (2009) point out that evidence is rarely used in this form. Evidence from evaluative data is often used in a diluted and delayed way. It is worth noting that even when evidence plays an instrumental role in decision-making, the interpretive process of evidence often affects the use. In some cases, evidence is used in a conceptual manner. It plays a role in influencing individual or shared working knowledge, even when it does not influence specific decisions. Delaware, Fillos, and Bailey (cited in Shwartz and Kardos, 2009) demonstrate evidence often provides background information on various issues, rather than guiding particular decisions. Symbolic use of evidence to justify existing preference or action is another common phenomena amongst policy makers. On the other hand, Cobb et al (2003) show that evidence is often used to justify decisions to either suspend or introduce new policy, or alternatively, to defend existing policy decisions. Decision makers also make decisions without evidence, despite its availability, or even discard the findings when they commission it. Shwartz and Kardos (2009) list a number of ways to encourage the use of evidence at the district level. The idea is to encourage collaboration with external organisations as a way to facilitate access to the “right” evidence and its interpretation (p.81). In turn, policy makers can develop structures or processes to fund and support the search for evidence, foster conditions for collective interpretation, develop political support for evidence use, and develop new strategies for building central office capacity for evidence use.

In Lebanon, there is a lack if not a complete absence of empirical research that analysed the relationship between policy making and research. Most of existing literature in this field are conference reports on the education reform (El Amine 2005, 2009). These conference reports conclude with broad recommendations that fall short of proposals for specific alternative directions and strategies (Akkari, 2010). Akkari argues that most education reform in the Arab world is driven by political agendas, dominated by the top-down approaches to change, lacks a

culturally-grounded knowledge base on effective reform, neglects planning for implementation, and lacks the professional capacity in those participating in the reform. She concludes that in order to avoid the previous failures of education reform in the Arab world, policy makers must change the guiding principles and assumptions that underlie definitions of what kind of problems need to be addressed. Yet at the same time policy makers must also focus on changing teacher, principal, and school organization as well as changing the design of reform and implementation strategies. While Akkari's paper provided a lot of food for thought concerning how education reform is carried out in the Arab world, it did not address or tackle the role of research in policy making.

Methodology

We employ a qualitative research methodology comprised of a desk review, document analysis, and a case study of one research institute, the Lebanese Association for Education Studies. The case study examined the relationship between the research organisations and policymaking.

Case study of a research institute:

The Lebanese Association for Education Studies (LAES) was selected as a case study to examine the role of research centres in shaping policy reform. LAES, established in 1995, is a professional, non-political, and non-profit organisation that aims to develop and disseminate educational knowledge that would contribute to the development of educational research in Lebanon. LAES is the only independent research organisation dedicated specifically to education research in Lebanon. The organisation was established following the end of the civil war and the start of the education reform plan. Over the past twenty years, it has been the leading research institute in education in Lebanon, and undertook many research projects, organised several regional and local seminars and conferences, and produced an extensive list of documentation and publications on education in Lebanon. The association members include some of the most prominent educationalists in Lebanon. Consent to mention the name of the association was granted.

LAES membership is restricted to PhD holders in the field of education or individuals currently working in the field of education. Membership to the association is granted following an application process, which consists of the applicant CV. Only PhD holders are eligible to apply, and virtually all members have a publication record. The administrative committee then reviews

the application and a decision is made. There have been proposals by the administrator and general assembly to introduce a new type of membership for PhD and Masters students. Yet this proposition has not been taken up. Nonetheless, a year ago the association started a platform where PhD students from all universities present their research and receive feedback from LAH members who also serve as mentors. The members of the organisation fluctuated between 40 to 30 members since the founding.

Over the past twenty years, LAES activities include research, conference, seminars, and consultancies. To date, the organisation served two purposes: conducting research and providing a platform for educationalists to meet. The organization succeeded to a large extent in achieving these objectives. Concerning research, over a period of twenty years, LAES produced 27 books and ten study reports. Research tackles educational issues, which in some cases, as we shall explain later, put the organization in confrontation with some officials who threatened to take legal actions against it. Yet the most significant challenge facing LAES in conducting research is funding. Most research was oriented by the donor prerogatives. Moreover, the lack of funding hindered LAES from conducting research in the priority areas of the members.

LAES soon earned reputation as the publication volume for increased. In turn, LAES began to take on more research from international organizations. In 2000, UNESCO and CERD contracted LAES to conduct an evaluation of the 1997 curriculum. This was one of several studies commissioned by national and international organisations. While this opportunity provided some income to the organization, a few members objected completely to carrying consultancy as in their view this will undermine the role of LAES as an independent organization focused on producing knowledge that matters to the academic community. In contrast, a few believed that consultancy was a natural thing for an organization of educational specialists with wide expertise in Lebanon. Yet, LAES administration maintained that they carefully select the topics and projects they accept so as to ensure an appropriate fit both for their interest and their mission.

One of the main activities carried out by the research institute was organizing conferences and publishing the proceedings. The fourteen conferences organised by LAES tackled some of the primary issues in education, such as history, higher education, and teacher education. It is worth highlighting the regional shift of LAES conferences, which now covers the Arab region.

LAES also organises a researcher lecture and discussion once a month with lecturers

hailing from Lebanon and the Arab world. The written media is always invited and sometimes covers some of the lectures.

Research instruments

The study adopted a qualitative research design comprised of one-to-one interviews and document analysis.

Individual interviews: We conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with policy makers involved (at MEHE and CERD) in both 1994 and 2010 reforms. We examined the process in planning and implementing the reform with respect to the role of researchers and research centres. A series of interviews were also conducted with founding and current members of LAES to contextualise the role of the association in education policy making in Lebanon. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analysed. In total, twenty in-depth interviews were conducted. The study interviewed fourteen out of the thirty registered members of LAES. Half of interviewees were founding members. We also interviewed seven policy makers: two ministers of education, three presidents of CERD and two senior policy makers who were involved in the two reforms at MEHE and CERD.

Document analysis: The study conducted a content analysis of any white papers or publications from the MEHE concerning the 1994 and 2010 reforms. A further review of all CERD publications was also carried out. This analysis aimed to examine the type of publications, the topics, and the funders.

Findings

Education reform and research centres: policy makers view

This study investigates policy makers' views on the role of research from research centres in the last two education reforms in Lebanon, 1994 and 2010, respectively. By studying these two specific reforms, we were able to collect more accurate and specific information on the role of research centres in the education sector reform process in Lebanon. Moreover, by comparing the two reforms, we also unravelled the extent to which the relationship between research centres and policy makers changed over time.

Process of developing the 1994 reform

Following the Taif Accord, the cabinet set up a committee of ten ministers, representing the various political and sectarian groups, to oversee education reform in Lebanon. CERD, a parallel entity to the committee tasked with the responsibility for education research and planning in Lebanon, created a committee from its own staff representing the various sectarian groups. The CERD committee drafted an education sector development plan which was then shared with the ministerial committee. The Ministers had their own advisors as well. The most examined aspect were the underpinning principles, namely the political aspect of the plan concerned with the identity which the educational plan was to propagate. The plan was then approved by the ministerial committee and later by the cabinet on the 17th of August 1994. The plan outlined very ambitious goals:

To build an advanced and cohesive Lebanese society that would allow its children to live their lives in a climate of freedom, justice and democracy, a society capable of assuming a cultural role in the Arab world and globally, through the development of the personality of the learner as an individual, a participant in the community and a law-abiding citizen who believes in the country's fundamental principles and human values (CERD, 1997, p. 2).

The very detailed Educational Plan dedicated a section to deal specifically with research. It highlighted the studies it used in developing the plan which include data, research, and statistics gathered by CERD and other public institutions as well as local and international institutes. However, the plan does not include references to these studies. The plan listed five new studies to be carried out by CERD. These were: the framework of teachers, comprehensive educational statistics, social survey in Lebanon, the labour market and its needs, and the problems of the child as a result of the war. All of these studies were funded by CERD. Only one of the studies, commissioned by external as well as internal expert, was actually published.

A new director of CERD was appointed in 1994. The new director took charge of developing the new curriculum. During our interview with him, he noted that one of the main priorities was to rectify the lack of an inclusive approach in developing the Educational Reform Plan 1994, which resulted in several complaints. To address this, an executive committee was established which represented private and public educational institutions, including schools as well as universities. The selection of these representatives took into account the sectarian representations, as well as the educational experience. Academics were heavily represented in the committee. 128 out of the 322 members of the committee were academics and the other members

were representatives from private and public schools in Lebanon, the general directorate of the ministry and civil servants from various departments of MEHE. Most of these academics (85) were from Lebanese University and seventeen from the American University of Beirut. The decisions of this committee were then taken to the ministerial cabinet to establish the new curriculum. The approval by the cabinet was virtually guaranteed, given the committee included representatives of the main political parties and sectarian groups.

The then-CERD director explained in our interview that he worked on issuing a decree to hire professors from the Lebanese University at CERD, however, the demanding nature of the work at CERD, coupled with the an objection from the Council of Civil Servants, blocked this attempt despite the support from the then-Prime Minister, Rafic Al-Hariri. The former director underscored the limited role research served during this stage, yet a number of studies were carried out to support the reform. CERD justified the limited role of research due to the reliance on academics as heads and members of the various reform and subject committees. Hence, academics and research centres could only contribute indirectly in the outcomes of their research, provided relevant issues were addressed and the scope could benefit the reform (Worpole, 1998).

In 2000, a new director was appointed for CERD. Reflecting back on this period, the director noted that developing the curriculum and the textbooks was the main priority at that time. As a result, research was overlooked. While CERD has the funding and the structure to do produce studies on education and efficacy of policies, such research was not considered a pressing issue at the time. Textbook development was the priority, according to the president at that time.

While both presidents of CERD, headed the office from 1994 to 2003, considered research to be important, they reported that it did not play as significant of a role as it should have when designing the education reform. They both noted the emphasis placed on the role of experts, rather than research and research centres at that time in part due to the lack of research centres specialised in education. As mentioned earlier, the education reform plan of 1994 highlighted a number of research gaps and accordingly commissioned a number of studies to accompany and support the educational reform.

Process of developing the 2010 Education Strategy

In 2005, a National Action Plan for Education for All was adopted in Lebanon, aimed at offering all children in society a quality education, with a particular emphasis on girls and

disadvantaged children. Contrary to 1994 reform, a white paper was commissioned by MEHE to develop a strategy for the education reform. The World Bank, which funded the education reform, highlighted the lack of an overall education strategy to guide the work of MEHE. According to one of the interviewed policy makers,

MEHE thought of the strategy as a means to make projects and get funds. The World Bank suggested developing a strategy for MEHE. They suggested advertising this, but I refused and suggested that we consult LAES being an organisation that includes the most prominent local researchers and represents everybody. The Minister of Education at that time, Professor Kabbani, agreed and that is how it happened.

Consequently, LAES was commissioned to conduct a review of the educational situation in Lebanon. For the first time, a report, which served as a white paper on the state of education in Lebanon, was drafted. It is worth noting that this policy suggested LAES be used to be a member of the organisation. According to the policy makers, including the minister at that time, the reason for selecting this particular research institute was its reputation as one of the pioneering research organisations and the knowledge some of the policy makers had of members of the research institute.

Almost a year later, LAES produced a report which analysed the main gaps in the current education system through a desk review of available research and statistics. LAES did not conduct new empirical research, but reviewed most of the available studies. The drafted report was then discussed at a closed meeting in which feedback was solicited from academics and educationalists, for which the report was amended to reflect. However, the strategy was not approved until almost three years later, when a new minister and cabinet were established. The new minister, Hassan Menimeneh, took an executive summary of the plan and presented it to the cabinet for approval. Approval was granted in 2010, and the work on the strategy began thereafter.

In interviews, senior civil servants in CERD criticised the limited involvement of their organisation in developing the 2010 education strategy. They also highlighted the brief and vague guidance in the strategy document, which does not specify concrete MEHE needs to undertake the strategy.

Based on analysis carried out by LAES, the document known as the National Educational Strategy in Lebanon (NES)³ was produced. It adopted 10 main priorities presented below:

NES (2007)	ESDP (2010-2015)
1. Education available on the basis of equal opportunity	1. Early childhood education
	2. Improving retention and achievement
	3. Development of infrastructure
2. Quality education that contributes to building a knowledge society	4. Professionalization of the teaching workforce
	5. Modernization of school management
	6. Achievement assessment and curriculum development
3. Education that contributes to social integration	7. Citizenship education
4. Education that contributes to economic development	8. ICT in Education
	9. National qualification framework
5. Governance of education	10. Institutional development

Table 1. Priorities for education sector development (2010-2015)

Contrary to 1994 Education Reform Plan, the 2010 strategy only provided general recommendations and priority areas for which the new reform was to focus. The strategy did not include the level of detail like in 1994 plan, nor did it specify what needed to be done in each of the priority areas. While the 2010 strategy comprised a review of the main statistics and indicators of education attainment in Lebanon as well as some research carried out in various related fields, the document cannot be considered comprehensive. The authors did not review research in all of the priority areas. A review of the citations indicates the strategy was built mainly on the statistics from CERD, as well as those from a few other research studies. The

document did not explain the rationale for the choice to focus on particular fields without a view to all of the areas. While the strategy document highlighted research gaps, there were no research recommendations to fill these gaps. Finally, the document was a review of existing research. There was a general sense among the policy makers involved in the reform that that no further research was necessary.

If we compared the processes of developing the two reforms in 1994 and 2010, we notice that CERD did not engage in carrying out the last reform. On the contrary, World Bank funded the establishment of a cabinet within MEHE known as the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP). The common trend between the two plans was the reliance on academics and specialists. However, for the first time in 2010 strategy, MEHE resorted to a research centre in developing the education reform strategy. In contrast, the 1994 reform plan identified a number of research priorities that should be carried out as part of the education reform plan. CERD, a public research institution attached to the Ministry of Education, commissioned independent researchers to conduct the studies under its supervision. However, as the role of CERD diminished in designing and planning the 2010 reform, its role in conducting research also decreased. This brings us to the role of CERD as a public research institute in influencing education policy making in Lebanon. This institute may be the only independent research institute that serves a ministry in Lebanon, and therefore may offer a model for other public research institutes.

CERD: an independent public research institute

CERD, founded as a public yet an independent institute in 1971, was tasked to conduct research and develop education policies independent from the influence of politics and political rivalries. As its mandate clearly states, CERD was appointed the tasks of conducting research for the following purposes: to maintain statistics, to plan education reform, to develop curricula and textbooks, and finally, to provide continuous teacher professional development. CERD has a committee of specialists who are expected to have a PhD degree with the goal to leverage their expertise. This committee, with input from the CERD president, oversaw the work of the research office, comprised of several units: curriculum, Planning, assessment, and projects. The research office with the explicit purposes: to conduct various educational research and disseminate results in appropriate ways, to develop the necessary studies of curricula, and to conduct educational statistics and issue bulletins with their own analysis of the results.

CERD’s golden age as a research institute was in the 70s and partially throughout the 80s, in spite of the civil war. However, research output began to decline as can be seen in the figure below, which tracks the number and type of CERD publications over the past 40 years.

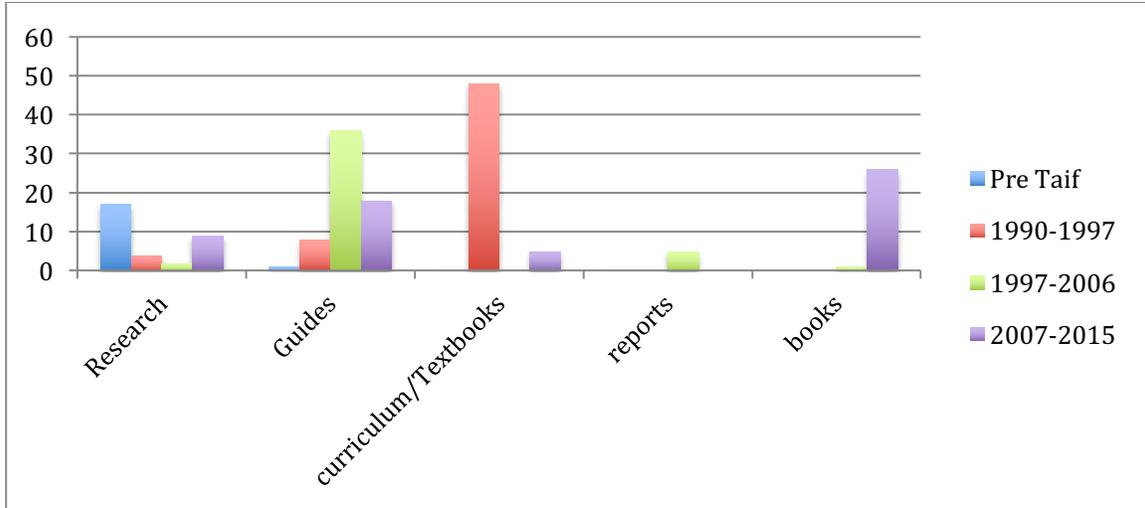


Figure 2 Research conducted by CERD over the past 40 years

Figure 1 shows the decrease in research outputs in CERD decreased over the past 40 years and reached its lowest stages between 1990 and 2006, while the last nine years witnessed a slight increase. Another interesting characteristic of research is funding. In the first twenty years, CERD was the main funder of in-house research and publications. However, we notice that in the last ten and fifteen years, international donors were funding the majority of CERD publications, as can be observed from the figure below.

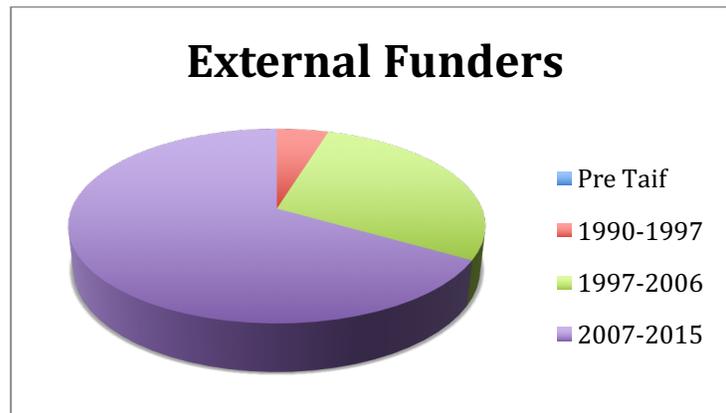


Figure 3 The role of external donors in funding CERD publications

The donors' role in funding CERD research did not exist prior to the civil war. However, we see how this role started to increase gradually since 1990 to reach a peak in the last ten years. This obviously affected the topics of the publications and the overall output. For instance, while in the 70s and 80s, we see publications focused on issues, such as the structure of the educational system in Lebanon, the socio-economic background of students, the income of the educational sector etc., we find shifts in topics reflecting the agenda and priorities of the donors. Hence, we research topics, such as pedestrian safety, reproductive health, sustainable development, etc.

There are numerous reasons for the decline in the importance of research at CERD. According to one of the former CERD presidents, the period of developing the new curriculum put all the emphasis on textbook design rather than research. Moreover, the specialist committee and several members of the CERD staff formerly responsible for research retired, yet were not replaced due to the hiring freeze on all civil servants throughout the public sector. Moreover, CERD senior staff salaries remained stagnant for years, an issue not found at national and private universities in Lebanon. CERD simply became an unattractive employer for academics. As the role of CERD diminished in the last fifteen years, the role of research in policy reform became even more marginal. Yet one of the most important factors in strengthening the relationships between research and policy making lies in the role of policy makers themselves, and the importance attributed to research.

Policy makers and the role of research in 1994 and 2010 reform plans

To further understand the role of research and research centres in the 1994 and 2010 reforms, it is important to examine the views of policy makers involved in these two reforms. While all of the interviewed policy makers highlighted the importance of research centres and research for policy makers, all of the interviewed policy makers noted the absence of a specific policy for engaging in research or research centres when designing policies or reform. As one minister put it, "there are no policies. Only the priorities are addressed based on pressure of public or the wish and mood of the minister."

Several reasons were cited for the poor role of research in the last two education reforms. One of the most cited factors was *CERD*. While explicitly established to conduct independent research for MEHE, the hollowed out budgets and personnel weakened the capacity to perform this role and created a void which was never filled. As a result, CERD's work became primarily focused on curriculum development as well as teacher professional development.

The *over reliance of Ministers of Education on external advisors* was seen as another factor that weakened the investment in research and collaborations with research centres. Ministers often hire a group of advisors, some of whom are academics, rather than relying on the ministry's civil servants expertise. When hiring academics as advisors, policy makers saw this as indirectly using and deploying research in their decision-making.

Ministries don't rely on research centres. The phenomena of advisors undermined research centres as advisors have their personal positions and agendas so these advisors promote the role of the minister and his beliefs which is often not based on evidence. Now ministers become a service provider for the minister's allies and advancement (Minister of MEHE).

While the research was institutionalised within CERD structure and budget, *the lack of a research culture amongst policy makers* rendered it ineffective. According to one of the interviewed ministers, the lack of awareness of the need of a research culture was more important than legislations enforcing it. According to two policy makers, the lack of awareness of the importance of research by policy makers compel research centres to play a more proactive role with the ministry of education by communicating their research recommendations and building bridges between the two.

Having examined policy makers' views of research, we shall now investigate the other point of view and focus on the attitudes of research centres towards influencing policies.

Research centres view of their role: the Hermit versus the activist

As mentioned earlier, the Lebanese Association for Education Studies (LAES) was founded almost twenty years ago and is a hub for academics and practitioners in the field of education. The main objectives of LAES are to produce and disseminate research knowledge, promote a scholastic community, interact with other organizations, and contribute to the development of education in Lebanon and the wider Arab region. The aim concerning the development of education did not specify how this would be achieved either directly or indirectly and whether this encompassed influencing policy makers. When examining the projects of the organisation and its publications, we noticed that almost all activities could be categorised as research or as conference planning and facilitation.

Interviews with members of the association (both founding and non-founding) revealed divergent views and expectations of the organization since its founding until now. There were

two opinions at the organization. One group was for restricting the organisation activities to research and knowledge production only, while the other group believed LAES should play an active role in influencing and shaping the views of the public and policy makers on educational matters. Yet members within the latter group differed in their views on how to influence policy making. The majority seemed to favour a less direct approach, mainly by choosing research topics that are topical, conduct conferences, and publish books and policy briefs on various educational issues. Others argued for a more direct approach, including advocacy and producing position papers, petitions, and statements. This debate began with the founding of the organisation, and continues to date.

In 2012, the aims of the organisations were revised to reflect an emphasis on the role of the organisation in contributing to the development of education locally and regionally. This is achieved through its research, conferences, and publications.

Although the selected research centre did not directly seek to influence policy making, we see numerous cases where it actually did affect, supported, and in some cases, clashed with policy makers. We shall now present the role of LAES in the 1994 and 2010 education reforms as well as other cases in which the centre played a major role in policy making.

LAES role in education reform in 1994

LAES was founded in 1995. Hence, it did not play a role as an association in 1994 reform which eventually resulted in the new national curriculum in 1997. In 2000, the newly appointed president of CERD was a member of LAES. However, many of LAES members participated in the reform as members of various universities.

As LAES built its reputation for high quality research on education, the demand increased for research output. UNESCO sought to conduct an independent evaluation of the new curriculum and textbooks, and following an agreement with the new CERD president, LAES was commissioned to conduct the evaluation. It is important to note here that the new CERD president was also a member of LAES.

A large team was assembled to conduct a survey with of teachers, principals, students, and parents. Progress reports and initial findings were regularly sent to CERD until a new president was appointed. The newly appointed president refused to accept the final report and criticised the commissioning of an independent institute to conduct an evaluation under CERD. After being pressured by the president of UNESCO office in Lebanon, CERD officially received

the report. A workshop was also organised to discuss the findings, however, LAES was not invited to participate. UNESCO and CERD maintained copyrights, and as such, the report findings were their property. As a result, the study was never published, but a copy remains accessible in the LAES Beirut office.

LAES and 2010 education reform

LAES played a significant role in the 2010 reform, as it was commissioned by then Minister of education, Khaled Kabbani, to write a white paper which defined the main educational priorities for the new education strategy. The decision to develop a white paper came as a result of World Bank recommendation, as well as at the advice of one MEHE specialist to commission LAES. This specialist at MEHE was also a member of LAES. LAES produced a vision document, which concluded with a synthesis of several educational priorities. The white paper also included a review of statistics and some studies upon which it recommended the ten reform priorities. The drafted plan was then discussed in a meeting of various stakeholders. The plan was consequently modified and later approved by the cabinet under Minister Hassan Mniemneh in 2010.

The involvement of LAES in this strategy is an example of the collaboration of MEHE with research centres in producing new policies. However, one of the criticisms of LAES involvement in this reform was the lack of research underpinning the strategy document, best summarised by one of LAES founding members in an interview: “If LAES is a research institute then it should have conducted research and based on that, it should have made the recommendations.”

Other LAES encounters with policy makers

The encounter of LAES with policy makers and policy making did not stop at 1994 and 2010 education reforms. LAES’ choice of research topics and conferences were always topically relevant and hence attracted attention from those in the education sector and policy makers. In 1999, LAES conducted a study of the conditions of Lebanese University. The published book caused a major uproar in the academic community, and resulted in the president of the LU sending a letter threatening to take legal actions against the association. In 2006, when Minister Khaled Kabbani became the head of MEHE, he planned to revise the regulations for the Lebanese University. Since the LAES study of LU, the authors of the book as well as other renowned professors at the Lebanese University were appointed with the task of developing new regulations for LU that would form the basis of a new law. The law was issued by the MEHE, approved by

the Cabinet, and is now awaiting implementation. The case of Lebanese University is one example of the significant role LAES played in influencing the quality of education in the public university.

Despite the above example of LAES influencing and playing a prominent role in shaping education sector policy making, such a course was never intended by LAES founders and members. Rather, the LAES role in policy making was a trickle down effect of its research and born of necessity due to organisational capacity. If the academic community or the Ministry of Education did not actively seek LAES, the organisation likely would remain disengaged from direct engagement with policy makers. While some LAES members preferred a more proactive role in influencing policy such as by producing policy papers, signing petitions or declarations, producing statements, or even writing in newspapers on topical issues in the name of the association, several members preferred distance due to a lack of consent on educational issues amongst the members, avoiding potential political disputes and polarization, and finally due to the lack commitment and time of members needed to advocate for particular causes. Several members in the group preferred a more passive role by publishing and leaving it to others to use the publications as they wished.

Discussion

The study on the relationship between policy makers and research institutes in the two reforms 1994 and 2010 revealed a haphazard cooperation wherein personal relationships and attributes were the main reasons for convergence or divergence. Policy makers, who have either known or were members of LAES, were naturally prone to seek its expertise. However, policy makers distant from the LAES network were more reluctant to collaborate with it and sometimes were even quite defensive about its research.

On the other hand, LAES remained cautious about actively seeking to influence policy makers. It preferred to leave it to ‘users’ to use the research it produced, regardless of whether the use was for public policy. LAES, as an organisation, preferred to avoid direct advocacy activities, such as producing statements, signing petitions, writing opinion pieces in the newspapers, or even supporting its members against the authority of policy makers. While one objective behind establishing the association in 1995 was to ‘rationalise the debate on education’, this rationalisation remained restricted to a debate within the academic sphere, and did not expand to the wider public or even to teachers or principals. As for its role in contributing to “the development of education”, policy makers needed to actively seek the expertise of LAES.

Policy makers, on the other hand, favoured the expertise of individual members of LAES, rather than contracting the institution as a whole. Several LAES members participated as advisors or experts in the various reforms, but were reluctant to do this as an association. This reluctance corresponds to the dominant trend among university educators toward the individualisation of research practice at the expense of the collective. Most importantly, this reflects the weak professional identity and community spirit amongst the scholarly community. Finally, this trend crystallised LAES's passive approach to avoid direct confrontation or engage in public debate or criticism regarding issues of public policy and policy makers.

A number of factors facilitated the convergence between policy makers and research centres. These factors include:

The role of policy brokers: our study confirmed Schwartz and Kardos' (2009) findings on the important role of what they describe as 'policy brokers', intermediaries who advocate the role of research in policy making. This policy broker serves as the push factor to establish this relationship. The necessity and ubiquity of policy brokers may indeed be necessary in part due to the passive role that research centres play in direct advocacy to policy makers or due to a need to reduce the complexity through the production of summaries or publications to reach a wider, non-academic audience.

The donor: The World Bank funded education development plan played a key role in pushing the MEHE to develop a long term strategy for education reform, instead of managing individual projects. While the World Bank planned to advertise a commission for a consultant to develop the strategy, the personal relationships played a role that led to the appointment of a research centre, instead of relying on individual experts which bring us to the second factor. At the same time, donors pushed an agenda of research priorities not necessarily aligned with education priorities of Lebanon. This increased donor influence on CERD publications becomes apparent mostly with less education-related issues, such as road safety and sustainable development. Meanwhile education attainment in deprived areas and student drop-out remained significant challenges facing policy makers in Lebanon.

The availability of reputable independent research institutes: LAES was commissioned for the evaluation of the 1997 curriculum and the development of the 2010 Strategy Plan due to its reputation as a strong research institute. The organisation boasts an impressive record of publications, and is considered a hub for many prominent educational researchers in Lebanon. To

add to that, Lebanon does not have many independent educational research institutes that can be charged with doing such a task.

In contrast, one of the main challenges that undermines the deployment of research by policy makers is the lack of a research culture. Even when the role of research in education planning was institutionalised in CERD, the absence of a research culture in the ministry resulted in diminishing the role of research for over 15 years. The current president of CERD is rekindling the research culture. According to her, the institutional structure of research within CERD, which doesn't hire many academics, necessitates collaborations between CERD and other independent research centres. This partnership has the potential to bridge the gap between the scholar community and policy making in Lebanon. While independent research institutes, such as LAES engaged with topical issues in education through its conferences and publications, the members grew less favourable for more direct advocacy strategies which engage the wider public.

Independent research institutes, whether private or non-governmental, can play a significant role in influencing the public debate on education. While this was one of the reasons cited as a driving force for the founders of LAES, members were reluctant to write op-eds or engage in wider debates on issues of public policy. In turn, journalists and policy makers set the public agenda for education reforms. One fundamental challenge lies in the difficulty to reach a consensus on various issues, particularly divisive topics. However, lobbying and advocating for a particular issue may result in the alienation of the association from some policy makers and political actors.

This study highlighted the changing role of public and non-governmental research in the last twenty years in Lebanon. There has been a growing role of the private research sector at the expense of the public research for policy making. This trend was demonstrated by the diminishing role of CERD in developing the 2010 education reform strategy. This was primarily due to the lack of funding, staff capacity, and low priority for research by policy makers during this period.

Conclusion

The study of the last two education reforms in Lebanon challenges the conventional wisdom of the estrangement between the policies and research. The results of this study demonstrate a longstanding relationship between research, education policies, and reform in Lebanon. This relationship entailed the convergence and divergence at various stages, depending

on policy makers as well as the availability and capacity of research associations. Despite the convergence of research and policy making, either through public or non-governmental avenues, the relationship between the two remains haphazard. Developing policies based on empirically researched evidence was not always on the mind of policy makers in Lebanon. This highlights the proactive role that researchers and research centres need to play in educating not only the masses, but also policy makers. Yet most academics affiliated with the association examined were reluctant to play a more direct role in influencing policy makers. There was concern with a deeper engagement for the association members in issues of political contestation could affect the activities, such as choosing their research and conference topics. However, the publications of the association were exclusively oriented toward academics. The association also did not target practitioners or the wider public, who could act as a pressure group on policy makers. These kinds of activities were seen as 'too populist'.

There is a significant need for inquiry into the role of research centres and academics as well academic institutions in policy making. Research remains still limited. This study showed that academics play a significant role through their 'expert' position in influencing policy making. Universities, on the other hand, and their role in shaping policies also remains under examined. Finally, the role of professional groups and NGOs in influencing policy makers and making are two spheres in need of further investigation.

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